

## Chaucer's Paradoxical Truth Connotative of His Self-regard

### PART 1

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Daunte thyself<sup>1</sup>

Chaucer in his poem *Truth* seems to express self-regard under the guise of the philosophical self-restraint expressed by Boethius. Chaucer counsels Sir Philip de la Vache<sup>2</sup>, son-in-law to the poet's friend, Sir Lewis Clifford, not to 'Stryve (Struggle) ... as doth the crokke (earthen ware pot) with the wal (wall),' but to 'Reule wel thyself' or to 'receyve in buxumnesse (by yielding)' 'That thee is sent' and to 'Suffyce unto thy good, though it be smal.'<sup>3</sup> Self-restraint, of which Chaucer speaks to Vache, corresponds to self-regard which the poet in the *Monk's Tale* advocates as a means to flee from 'al the world,' although the tale seems at first glance to favour the Boethian self-restraint. The Monk gives his opinion on Hercules's downfall: 'Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe (short space of time)? / For hym that folweth al this world of prees, / Er he be war, is ofte yleyd ful lowe. / Ful wys is he that kan hymselfen knowe! / Beth war, for whan that Fortune list to glose (flatter), / Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe / By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose (VII (B<sup>2</sup>) 2136–2142).' Self-defense seems to be meant by 'hymselfen knowe.' If Hercules had not trusted in the favour of Fortune, could anyone

have detained the course of her, once she had determined to turn her back to him? The fickle goddess kindly favours men with prosperity for a while but she can take away again what she gave.<sup>4</sup> The Monk describes 'tragedie' as 'a certeyn storie ... / Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen out of heigh degree / Into myserie.'<sup>5</sup> Chaucer may have learnt by adversity a teaching of disdaining the ways of this crowded world. His 'adversitee' might have lessoned him in relying on himself. Entangled in the factional strife at the king's court of the late 1380's, when he is supposed to have written the *Monk's Tale* and *Truth*,<sup>6</sup> he may have exercised caution against the 'prees.' Chaucer, who, surrounded by 'lordes of ful heigh estaat,' stood in the royal court in which each man bore himself 'for hymself,'<sup>7</sup> might by experience (so the Wife of Bath would say) have found it wiser to keep 'that thing that' he 'wolde' say to himself. In the *House of Fame* Chaucer speaks of himself: 'I can noght hyder (hither), graut mercy (gramercy), / For no such cause, by my hed! / Sufficeth (It suffices) me, as (as if) I were ded, / That no wight have my name in honde (on his lips). / I wot myself best how y stonde; / For what I drye (suffer) or what I thynke, / I wil myselfen al hyt drynke, / Certeyn, for the more part (the greater part), / As fer forth as I kan myn art (1874-1882).' His behaviour shows that he might have withdrawn into himself.<sup>8</sup>

### Boece

Chaucer, although familiar with Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, might not have discerned the difference between the Christian revelation and the Boethian philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The Boethian self-restraint is described as withdrawing a man from the bodily thralldom. Says the *Boece*: '... ye that ben combryd (encumbered)

and disseyvid (deceived) with worldly affeccions, cometh now to this sovereyn good, that is God, that is refut (refuge) to hem that wolen come to hym (meter 10 of book 3. 7-11).’ He who has had ‘the maystrye over hymself’ has a ‘tranquillitee’ of his soul or a life independent of worldly cares. A parallel to the Boethian ‘desdayn of one’s self could be found in *An ABC*: ‘I wot it wel, thou (i.e. ladi bright) wolt ben oure socour, / Thou art so ful of bountee, in certeyn (verily). / For, whan a soule falleth in errour, / Thi pitee goth and haleth him ayein. / Thanne makest thou his pees with his sovereyn, / And bringest him out of the crooked strete (path). / Whoso thee loveth, he shal not love in veyn; / That shal he fynde, as he the lyf shal lete (leaves) (65-72).’ By analogy with the Christian deity the supreme good described by Boethius is recognized as being equivalent to man’s ‘verray welefulnesse,’ that is, his true ‘contree’ in which he is to ‘dwelle’ or to be in communion, though within himself, with ‘the good.’ Boethius hold that the ‘soverayn blisfulnesse’ may be secured by distrusting the false gifts of Fortune and commanding one’s own self: ‘... yif it so be that thow (i.e. mortel folk) art myghty over thyself (that is to seyn, by tranquillite of thi soule), than hastow thyng in thi power that thow noldest nevere leesen (diminish), ne Fortune may nat bynymen (take away) it the. And that thow mayst knowe that blisfulnesse ne mai nat standen in thynges that ben fortunous and temporel, now undirstond and gadere (gather) it togidre thus: yif blisfulnesse be the soverayn good of nature that lyveth by resoun, ne thilke thyng nys nat soverayn good that may ben taken away in any wise (for more worthy thyng and more dygne is thilke thyng that mai nat ben take away); than scheweth it wel that the unstablenesse of fortune may nat atayne to resceyven verray blisfulnesse (2. p4. 134-149).’ The Boethian conception of

self-restraint is, thus, less contradictory to the Christian self-disdain.

The Middle Ages, therefore, might have believed the Boethian independence from the enthralled condition of worldly life to be the Christian 'desdayn' of the bondage of man's sins. They believed the Boethian philosophy orthodox, not pagan.<sup>10</sup> Chaucer classes the *Boece*, his translation of Boethius's *Consolation*, among 'bookes of legendes of seintes and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun, / That thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene (X(I) 1088-1089).' Whether Chaucer recognized the distinction between the divine self-mortification and the philosophical self-restraint or not is not certain. He might have feigned to be ignorant of the matter. Anyhow the *Consolation* had an influence on his thoughts after the years when he translated it.<sup>11</sup> In *Truth* Chaucer uses the Boethian material for the self-regard from which Criseyde was driven by sheer necessity to obey Diomedes's 'counsel.' 'Retornynge (Revolving) in hir soule up and down / The wordes of this sodeyn (impetuous) Diomedes, / His grete estat (high position), and perel of the town (i.e. her native town), / And that she was allone and hadde nede / Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede (breed) / The cause whi ... / That she took fully purpos for to dwelle (remain),' Criseyde said "But syn I se ther is no bettre way, / And that to late is now for me to rewe (rue), / To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe."'<sup>12</sup> The Wife of Bath's sentiments, coincident with Criseyde's, are found in lines 213-214 of the Prologue to her *Tale*. The Wife brags: 'What sholde I taken keep hem (i.e. her husbands) for to plesse, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?'

Vache is admonished against trusting the false goods of Fortune in lines 1, 6, 8-11, 16-17 of *Truth*: 'Flee fro the prees, and

dwelle with sothfastnesse / ... / Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede / .... / Tempest thee (Distress violently thyself) noght al croked (crooked things) to redresse, / In trust of hir that turneth as a bal; / Gret reste stant in litel besinesse (anxiety); / Be war also to sporne (kick) ayeyns an al / .... / The wrastling for this world axeth (invites) a fal (fall). / Her is non hoom, her nis but wilderness.' 'sothfastnesse,' here, can be read as an equivalent of the Boethian 'trouthe' or the Christian 'trouthe.'<sup>13</sup> In lines 18–21 of *Truth* Chaucer advises Vache to get back to his own 'contree' which, Boethius writes, 'rejoisseth hym (i.e. the lord of his cuntre) of the duellynge of his citezeens'<sup>14</sup>: 'Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste out of thy stal! / Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al; / Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede.' He in the *Parson's Tale* uses man's 'regne' for the 'contree' corresponding to the true 'cuntre' discussed by Boethius. In *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, again, he refers to the 'trouthe' which is meant for fidelity: 'Trouthe is put down, resoun is holden (esteemed) fable; / Vertu hath now no dominacioun / Pitee exyled, no man is merciabile; / Through covetyse is blent (blinded) discrecioun (discernment). / The world hath mad a permutacioun / Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse (instability) (16–20).' The Christian truth and the Boethian truth seem to be liable to be confounded. The 'trouthe' or 'sothfastnesse' in *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton* is almost indistinguishable from the 'trouthe' of *Lak of Stedfastnesse*: 'My maister Bukton, whan of Crist our kyng / Was axed what is trouthe or sothfastnesse, / He nat a word answerde to that axing, / As who saith, "No man is al trewe," I gesse (1–4).' Certainly man is not 'trewe,' though his 'manere' is 'an hevene for to see.'<sup>15</sup> He who is enslaved by his sins tends to err.

Chaucer's 'Dauute thyself,' which is construed to be to some extent the same import as Criseyde's 'purpos for to dwelle,' or the Wife's 'profit,' seems paradoxical as the Christian self-restraint is a state of man's independence from the thralldom of his sins, and as the Boethian self-restraint, also, is a realization of man's improvement of himself by means of his escape from the worldly cares. Chaucer, however, never refers to man's escape from the sins of enthralling him, which is indicated by the following lines from the *Parson's Tale* (X(I) 1016): '... a man moot accusen hymself of his owene trespass ... but he shal blame and wyten hymself and his owene malice of his synne.' The following envoy to the *Balade de Bon Conseyl* contains the lines (22-27) addressed to Vache: '... leve thyn old wrecchednesse; / Unto the world leve (cease) now to be thral; / Crye him mercy, that of his hy goodnesse / Made thee of noght (nothing), and in especial / Draw unto him, and pray in general / For thee, and eek for other, hevenlich mede.' Nor does Chaucer refer to man's communion with the natural goodness implanted within his self.<sup>16</sup> Says Dame Philosophy in the *Consolation*: '... how schulde men deme the sothe of any thing ... yif ther nere a rote of sothfastnesse that were yplounded (plunged) and hyd in the naturel principles, the whiche sothfastnesse lyvede within the depnesse of the thought (3. m 11. 38-43)?' The truth which the holy writ or the *Boece* teaches is to master man's natural desires by accepting the will of God who can foresee his 'conseilles' and acts, although He permits so much misery and evil to enter the world. Man cannot escape from 'the divyne purveaunce.' True felicity is realized in goodness or the God within his self; in this 'divyne thought'<sup>17</sup> man is enabled to have a consolation for his 'wrecchidnesse.'<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Chaucer possibly does not find in being

god-like his truth. He does not awake Criseyde to the Boethian truth. Criseyde, thus, sees falsity in a felicity which she and her lover enjoy, but is unable to have felicity within herself. To Pandarus says she: 'Endeth thanne love in wo? Ye, or men lieth (lie)! / And alle worldly blisse (joy), as thynketh me (methinks), / The ende of blisse ay sorwe it occupieth; / And whoso troweth nat that it so be, / Lat hym upon me, woful wrecche, ysee (look), / That myself hate, and ay my burthe (birth) acorse (curse), / Felyng alwey, fro wikke I go to worse (4. 834-840).' She decides to adopt a way to defend herself. The Wife also is faithful to her 'inclinacioun.' She is proud-hearted; assured of her 'praktike': 'I governed hem (i.e. her husbands) so wel, after my lawe, / That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe (glad) / To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre / .... / Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle / .... / For wynnyng wolde I al his (i.e. her husband's) lust endure, / And make me a feyned appetit (III (D) 219-221, 414, 416-417).' January in the *Merchant's Tale*, who is cunningly trifled with by his wife, is somewhat akin to each 'dotard' of the Wife, being consumed with his nasty old 'lust.' This old man praises wedlock, a heavenly bliss on earth; he takes delight in enjoying such heavenly felicity as all wedded men have, keeping himself from sinning against God's Law.<sup>19</sup> Asked for advise by January, Placebo, his brother, sets him on taking what he desired without regard to the words of Solomon 'Wirk alle thyng by conseil.' Placebo holds his brother's 'conseil' not to be surpassed by anyone's. January who holds that 'felicitee / Stant in delyt' never means to act on anyone's advice, as is said by his another brother Justinus who dissuaded him from making an oak and ivy marriage: 'Ye mowe (may), for me, right as yow liketh do.'<sup>20</sup> He really did as he chose.

With respect to Chaucer's 'Daunte thyself' we gain further knowledge of the Christian 'relees of teene' and the Boethian 'Reule thyself' on a brief examination of the *Parson's Tale* and the *Boece*.

### Notes

1 *Chaucer's Works* are quoted from the edition of F. N. Robinson, Boston, 1957.

2 See *Chaucer's Works*, p. 861.

3 Lines 12, 6, 15, 2.

4 See the *Boece*, 2. p 2.

5 VII (B<sup>2</sup>) 1973-1977.

6 The *Boece* was probably translated shortly after 1380 and *Truth* was put between 1386-1389.

7 See I(A) 1182.

8 Cf. *Merciles Beaute*, 27-39.

9 See the *Troilus*, 5. 1835-1848: 'O yonge, fresshe (lusty) folkes, he or she, / In which that love up groweth with youre age, / Repeyreth (Return) hom fro worldly vanyte / And of youre herte up casteth the visage / To thilke God that after his ymage / Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire (fair) / This world, that passeth soone as floures faire. / And loveth hym, the which that right for love / Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye (redeem), / First starf (died), and roos (rose), and sit in hevene above; / For he nyl falsen (betray) no wight, dar I seye, / That wol his herte al holly on hym leye (lay). / And syn he best to love is, and most meke (gentle), / What nedeth feynede (feigned) loves for to seke?'

10 See R. D. French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, New York, 1947, p. 119.

11 See Bernard L. Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*, New York, 1965, pp. 47ff.

12 See James L. Shanley, 'The *Troilus* and Christian Love,' in *Chaucer*, ed. E. Wagenknecht, New York, 1959, pp. 385ff.

13 See D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, London, 1953, p. 60.

14 1. p 5. 21-22.



<sup>15</sup> See V (F) 558.

<sup>16</sup> See 3. m 11. 10–17. The idea of the Boethian self-restraint is incorporated in Chaucer's *Fortune*: 'No man is wrecched, but himself it wene, / And he that hath himself hath suffisaunce (25–26).' Socrates is represented as a 'champioun' against Fortune: 'O Socrates, thou stidfast champioun, / She (i.e. Fortune) never mighte be thy tormentour; / Thou never dreddest hir oppressioun, / Ne in hir chere founde thou no savour (*Fortune* 17–20).'

<sup>17</sup> Boethius finds the free will of man in this thought. See 5. p 3.

<sup>18</sup> See the *Boece*, 5. p 6.

<sup>19</sup> See IV (E) 1637–1652.

<sup>20</sup> See IV (E) 1554.

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